

Al Qaeda Camp in Oregon

By: Patrick J. McDonnell / The Los Angeles Times
Tuesday, September 24, 2002

Training for jihad in the Pacific Northwest.

Prosperity may have bypassed this corner of the Pacific Northwest, but self-styled entrepreneur Earnest James Ujaama sensed opportunity. In the secluded landscape of parched ranch land and rugged volcanic outcroppings, he saw visions of Afghanistan--and a chance for profit in the jihad training business.

In the fall of 1999, federal authorities say, Ujaama faxed a proposal promoting creation of a "jihad training camp" in the United States. It was addressed to a radical London cleric and reputed Al Qaeda recruiter named Abu Hamza Al-Masri.

Ujaama--a Muslim convert from Seattle, born James Ernest Thompson--had become a protege of Abu Hamza, according to U.S. officials who say the American pledged bayat, an oath of loyalty, to the mullah. Ujaama studied Islam at the London mosque and helped manage an affiliated Web site advocating violence against the United States and other Western nations.

Initial response to the proposed Afghanistan-style training operation in rural Oregon seemed favorable.

Officials say two suspected Al Qaeda associates from Europe were soon dispatched to inspect the site, a tumbledown parcel containing several derelict trailers and cordoned off by barbed wire. Upon arrival, one of the operatives boasted that he was "a hit man" for Osama bin Laden, according to court records.

Ujaama, in his early 30s at the time, already had an impressive record of business start-ups. He had won acclaim from lawmakers in the Pacific Northwest and Nevada for his entrepreneurship and community activism. A Washington state legislator had even proclaimed an official day in his honor.

By the time Ujaama floated his training camp pitch--to charge recruits for instruction--he was already familiar with Al Qaeda's network of boot camps in eastern Afghanistan, authorities say. He had visited the region, holding a letter of introduction to Taliban authorities provided by Abu Hamza. He even helped one young recruit from the London mosque gain entry to a terrorist training facility in Afghanistan, according to law enforcement documents.

Ultimately, authorities say, Ujaama's audacious proposal disintegrated into a kind of moujahedeen comic-opera. According to federal investigators, the Al Qaeda agents who ventured to Oregon complained of grossly inflated claims and abysmal conditions at the ranch. Apparently blaming Ujaama, the burly militant calling himself Bin Laden's hit man mused about killing the Seattle deal-maker.

"Ujaama basically saw this as a cash cow," said one federal official, referring to the proposed Oregon camp. But, he said, once the amateurish reality on the ground became clear, "No self-respecting international terrorist would have anything to do with" Ujaama's plan.

Today, almost three years later, the 36-year-old Ujaama sits in federal custody in Seattle, accused of providing material support to international terrorists. At the heart of the indictment against him is the alleged training camp scheme.

Privately, however, authorities acknowledge that the case against Ujaama is aimed at bagging a more substantial quarry: the London cleric, Abu Hamza.

Abu Hamza is a striking figure--one-eyed, steel claws for hands, a victim, he says, of a mine explosion in Afghanistan. The sheik is an open admirer of Bin Laden and has inspired a global network of followers, making him one of the best-known advocates of militant Islam in Europe.

Earlier this month Abu Hamza and his mosque hosted a de facto celebration of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which was labeled "A Towering Day in History."

U.S. and French authorities have privately expressed frustration that London has not moved more aggressively against a number of British-based Muslim militants, notably Abu Hamza, a naturalized citizen of the United Kingdom. Despite his incendiary talk--the cleric has urged youngsters to go to Afghanistan, has publicly justified last year's and other attacks, and has warned of more--Abu Hamza denies inciting or participating in violence. So far, British freedom of speech statutes have shielded him from prosecution. The sheik addressed Oxford students last year.

Sources have confirmed that Abu Hamza and the two alleged Al Qaeda emissaries dispatched to Oregon are the three unnamed co-conspirators cited in the indictment filed against Ujaama in federal court in Seattle.

Ujaama is not charged with anything related to last year's terrorist attacks. However, he is one of only a handful of U.S. natives accused of aiding Al Qaeda.

According to the indictment and other law enforcement accounts, Ujaama conspired with confederates "to murder and maim," while discussing crimes that included robberies, poisoning water supplies and firebombing vehicles.

The complex picture emerging of Ujaama is that of a hustler who dabbled on the fringes of global terrorism with an eye to make a buck--an image more suggestive of a capitalist go-getter than of a political or religious fanatic.

At the same time, Ujaama has expressed increasingly radical views--recently echoing Abu Hamza's conspiracy theory that Washington likely had advance knowledge of the Sept. 11 attacks but refused to intervene, in an apparent effort to have a pretext with which to crack down on Muslims worldwide.

Whatever his true convictions, Ujaama clearly has become an important pawn in one corner of the war on terrorism: U.S. efforts to reach into the nerve center of radical Islam in London and take down a leader regarded as one of Al Qaeda's principal front men.

An Entrepreneurial Spirit From an Early Age

He still was James Ernest Thompson when he started his first business at age 9, raking leaves in the neighborhood with his brother. He launched a home maintenance service when he was 14, then moved in with relatives in California, where he hawked discount store coupons. At 16 he was back in Seattle, where he was named top salesman at a downtown clothier before moving on to other self-employment ventures, at one point directing profits to starving children in Ethiopia.

"For my brother, being an entrepreneur was the ultimate," says Mustafa Ujaama, 34, an intense, bearded man and the father of seven. "But it wasn't about money. My brother ... never had a brand-new car; he never had a house. It was about bringing jobs to the community, about helping people. He always told us he got into business so we wouldn't have to struggle."

He still was James Ernest Thompson when his father brought FBI attention to the young family by his associations with the Black Panther Party.

Almost from infancy, James and his two younger brothers were steeped in social concerns. Lacking money for a baby-sitter, his mother took them along when she joined a picket line in support of striking teachers at an elementary school resisting plans to be moved.

"We were all out there chanting, 'Hell no, our teachers won't go,' " recalled his mother, Peggi Thompson, who is raising Ujaama's 12-year-old son, Karim. She worked with a Seattle anti-poverty program and the community college. "From a very young age, my children were taught, and I was taught: 'Your voice means something. Never be afraid to stand up for what you believe!'"

Patriotism also was a family value.

"We always put the flag out for Veterans Day and Fourth of July," Ujaama's mother said. "Those are big days in our family." She traces her family's lineage to the Revolutionary War. Her Seattle condominium is crammed with photographs of loved ones,

among them pictures of two uncles who were decorated for their service with the Tuskegee Airmen, the acclaimed unit of black fliers in World War II. One was lost over Italy; his Purple Heart citation occupies a position of honor. Also here are uniformed photographs of James' younger brother, Mustafa, a Persian Gulf War veteran. When he was interviewed recently about his brother, Mustafa was wearing a T-shirt with the logo of the New York City Fire Department.

Prominent on the bookcase is a 1994 photo of Ujaama receiving a legislative certificate proclaiming "James Ujaama Day" in Washington state. Ujaama had changed his name several years earlier in solidarity with Mustafa, who had adopted the new name and converted to Islam while in the military. (Mustafa says "Ujaama" is roughly equivalent to the Swahili expression for "cooperative economics," and the Arabic for "group.")

James Ujaama's early history recalls that red-white-and blue American archetype: the up-and-comer. That's the impression Ujaama--born with "the gift of the gab," his mother says--left in his wake as he hastened to transcend his working-class origins.

"James Ujaama was going places," says Charlie James, a longtime community activist and family friend. His heroes were self-made black millionaires like Ezell Stephens, who founded a successful fried chicken chain in Seattle.

"He spewed out ideas like a machine gun: books, buttons for black empowerment, business classes," wrote Robert L. Jamieson Jr., a columnist for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer who has known Ujaama for a decade.

An impatient Ujaama hadn't even completed high school before he enrolled at the University of Washington. He was found out and forced to study for an equivalency degree--then, in a fit of rage that displayed his ample temper, Ujaama tore up the document, and dropped out of college.

"That upset me so much. I think I still have the pieces of paper somewhere," his mother recounted. "A family member once said: If James would ever stick to one idea, and give it to someone else to carry it out, he would be a multimillionaire by now."

Averse to the 9-to-5 routine, and hesitant to work for others, Ujaama reinvented himself as a peddler of business itself.

He bought and sold a small computer shop and used the proceeds to co-found a nonprofit organization, Be Your Own Boss Unlimited, an urban self-help group. Ujaama soon was an inspirational speaker in demand, an entrepreneurial guru offering an alternative to drugs and gangs as the crack cocaine epidemic mushroomed. "Young, gifted and black," was the headline of an admiring profile in the business pages of the Seattle Times in 1991.

By then, Ujaama had put together enough cash to publish a handbook, "Young People's Guide to Starting a Business Without Selling Drugs." The book jacket includes a photograph of Ujaama on the front porch of his mother's rambling home on a tree-lined Seattle street wearing a jacket emblazoned with the motto, "Success."

Privately, some friends accused Ujaama of being over the top.

"People said he was square," said an older cousin, Aaron Dixon, a former leader of the Black Panther Party in Seattle. "But James was a serious, dedicated young man. He knew what he wanted. And he went after it." Photos from those days show Ujaama baby-faced, slim, bespectacled, clean-shaven, typically in a suit and tie.

As the 1990s progressed, even as he was perpetually broke, Ujaama persuaded banks and other institutions to help fund the publishing of two sequels to his entrepreneur treatise. He was invited to speak at a youth panel at the 1994 National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People convention in Chicago. He taught business skills at nonprofit training centers in Seattle and Las Vegas, lobbied for legislation to aid minority and youth business and became close to regional black politicians, with whom he was often photographed.

Yet Ujaama never wavered from his deep belief that business--not politics--was the path to prosperity.

"Don't get into politics: Politicians are only prostitutes for business," Ujaama counseled his brother Mustafa when his younger sibling joined Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign.

In 1996, Ujaama published an autobiographical novel, "Coming Up," tracking the life trajectories of two black entrepreneurs--one straight, one a drug dealer. He went to Hollywood and tried unsuccessfully to sell a screenplay version of the urban

allegory. That failure left him disenchanted and, again, short on cash.

Mustafa, who noticed Europe's fascination with African American culture while stationed in Germany, suggested his brother migrate across the Atlantic. Mustafa had a friend in London.

By this time, Ujaama was in his 30s and the father of a young son he couldn't support. About the time he published his novel, Ujaama followed his brother's lead and embraced Islam. He took his entrepreneurial zeal--and disappointments--to the streets of Europe's most populous city. There he found a home and a mosque in the ethnically diverse hotbed for radical Islam, in what the European press came to call Londonistan.

More Like a Political Meet Than a Religious One

On the recent anniversary of Sept. 11, the scene at North London Central Mosque in Finsbury Park resembled a raucous political convention.

The mosque was once frequented by Richard Reid, the indicted "shoe bomber," and Zacarias Moussaoui, accused of being the so-called 20th hijacker. On this anniversary day, a gathering of radical Muslim speakers concluded that the United States got what it deserved.

Outside, as scores of police in bright yellow vests kept guard, Muslim youths--many the sons of recent immigrants--mingled with older worshipers identified by observers as battle-hardened veterans of Afghanistan, Algeria and Chechnya, among other fronts. All occasionally broke into chants of "Allah Akhbar!" (God is great!) as a riposte to noisy anti-immigrant protesters across the way.

The Finsbury Park mosque is a squat, three-story brick building rising across the street from a subway stop in a bustling neighborhood that, in its edgy urban energy, is more reminiscent of immigrant enclaves of New York and Los Angeles than the tourist-guide London of Big Ben, friendly bobbies and cantankerous cockneys. Of all the mosques in London--and there are scores, serving a very diverse and overwhelmingly moderate Muslim population--Ujaama was drawn to this one, among the most notorious in Europe. It is the base of Abu Hamza.

The cleric was born Mustafa Kemal in Egypt. He is a brawny onetime nightclub bouncer and U.K.-trained civil engineer.

After last year's attacks, Washington placed Abu Hamza on a list of suspected terrorist financiers because of his links to the Islamic Army of Aden, an Al Qaeda-associated group allegedly responsible for kidnapping foreigners and the 2000 attack on the U.S. warship Cole in Yemen.

U.S. authorities charge that Ujaama--who grew a scraggly beard and took the names Bilal Ahmed and Abu Samayya, among other aliases--served as a kind of aide-de-camp to Abu Hamza. The FBI says Ujaama helped craft the cleric's affiliated "Supporters of Shariah" Web site and tried to convince new recruits to pledge bayat to the sheik.

In London, Ujaama set up a political Web site, <http://www.stopamerica.org>, which lashed out at U.S. policy but stopped short of advocating violence.

"We the people of the United States charge this government and their coalition with conspiracy to commit genocide and crimes of terrorism against Muslim people in our names," Ujaama wrote in his "founder's message" on the Web site, which since has been shut down.

Ujaama married a Somalian immigrant and fathered a daughter, now 2. The couple lived for a time in a flat on a drab street of brick row houses in an immigrant enclave of East London, near Ujaama's in-laws and the commuter train tracks. According to Abu Hamza, Ujaama worked with refugee families from Kosovo, a province of Serbia, the dominant republic in Yugoslavia. Ujaama told relatives he was working with children and orphans.

He founded a Web design and computer business called visioideas and forged a relationship with a Karachi, Pakistan-based Internet development firm, eTaleem.com.

"I found Bilal [Ujaama] to be a good Muslim as well as a professional businessman," Najam Hammed, eTaleem's chief

operating officer, said in an e-mail from Karachi. "He was much interested in educating the down trodden [sic] and uplifting the image of the Muslims and the allegations leveled against him are the opposite of what we found him to be."

But the computer business was apparently not lucrative. One American friend who visited his London flat said Ujaama had to borrow money from "the brothers" at the mosque for carfare.

Nonetheless, Ujaama told his Pakistani associates that he went to Afghanistan to set up a computer training institute there. According to one federal source, Ujaama carried a handwritten letter of recommendation from Abu Hamza addressed to the interior minister of the Taliban government in Kandahar.

A confidential FBI memorandum states that Ujaama also is suspected of "taking computers to the Taliban" on behalf of Abu Hamza before the U.S. attack after Sept. 11.

In a brief impromptu interview in the mosque's red-carpeted basement, Abu Hamza conceded that Ujaama served as a Web master for a while but scoffed at suggestions of a father-son type relationship.

"Why do I need to give him a letter?" Abu Hamza asked, as a young follower, his face hidden behind a colorful Palestinian-style head scarf, abruptly reached out to switch off a journalist's tape recorder. "In Afghanistan, they don't read. They just shoot first," Abu Hamza said, laughing and generating chuckles from his entourage.

The cleric's London attorney denied that Ujaama and Abu Hamza were as close as U.S. prosecutors allege. "Abu Hamza is not the type of person to get close to many people," said Muddassar Arani, the solicitor. "That's basically because he knows anyone who tries to get close to him is probably working for the government."

While living in London, Ujaama made regular trips home to Seattle. Often he brought along some of the tape-recorded speeches of Abu Hamza that are sold at the Finsbury Park mosque.

Back in Seattle, Ujaama's younger brother Mustafa had helped establish a storefront mosque in the central city. Ujaama introduced Abu Hamza's teachings to the Seattle congregation.

"He brought us all the books and knowledge that you couldn't get here in America," said Ali Shahid Abdul-Raheem, 30, formerly known as Patrick Fitzsimmons. An ex-cabby from Seattle, Raheem said he converted to Islam while doing prison time for robbery.

During some of Ujaama's visits, the prayer leader, or imam, of the Seattle mosque was an outspoken man of Lebanese origin named Semi Osman. Fluent in Arabic, Osman was skilled at reciting from the Koran. Osman also was a mechanic, perpetually short of cash and supporting a wife and her two children from a previous marriage.

For a time it appeared that Osman and fellow worshipers found hope for a better life almost 400 miles to the southeast, on a 160-acre patch of parched earth north of the California line.

Bly is a forlorn burg of about 700 souls in ranching country known for its isolation, red band trout and mule deer. Its most notable event came in 1945, when a Japanese balloon bomb that had drifted over the Pacific detonated and killed a woman and five children who were picnicking. The town's economy has been on life support since the lumber mill moved out more than a dozen years ago.

In mid-1999, a friend of Osman's wife married a gruff Oregon rancher who had a place outside of Bly. The woman, also a converted Muslim, invited Osman, his wife and family to join them, according to various people knowledgeable about the events.

Osman shared his aspirations with some friends at the mosque. One version is that he proposed a kind of Islamic commune at the ranch, a place where all could live, practice their religion, customs and raise their children according to strict Muslim law. Another mosque member says Osman suggested the ranch could provide fresh meat according to Muslim dietary laws, even a possible cemetery site for religious burials. Yet another says that "Sammy," as he was known, simply "wanted to be a potato farmer."

Whatever the reasons, by the fall of 1999 worshipers from Seattle began making the odyssey to Bly. Abdul-Raheem, the former Fitzsimmons, drove his Graytop cab all the way down--and was bitterly disappointed at the dilapidated trailers and hillbilly-like atmosphere.

"The place was a mess," said Abdul-Raheem, who sports a drooping reddish beard and might seem at home in an Irish pub--except for his woven kufi, or skullcap. "I slept in my cab and went home. I was sorry I missed the weekend fares in Seattle."

But authorities say Ujaama the entrepreneur saw a possible business bonanza, one that conveniently aligned with his political program.

According to the indictment, in October 1999 Ujaama sent a fax to London proposing the site as a training camp. He compared the rolling, dry terrain to that of Afghanistan and said the area could be used to "store and conceal guns, bunkers and ammunition," while also serving as a handy safe house for a proposed visit by Abu Hamza, the indictment says.

Ujaama's motives went beyond "just looking for a way to make a buck," said U.S. Atty. John McKay, the top federal prosecutor in Seattle. "He changed to support terrorists."

On Nov. 26, authorities allege, Abu Hamza dispatched two "emissaries" to evaluate the Oregon property as a potential training camp. According to the indictment, the pair flew to New York, then made their way to Seattle and Bly, where they met potential training candidates, established security through the use of guard patrols and passwords, conducted firearms training "and viewed a video recording on the subject of improvised poisons."

Sources familiar with the case identified the pair as aides to Abu Hamza. One was Oussama Kassir, a bulky Swede of Lebanese ancestry with a long criminal background who supposedly claimed to be Bin Laden's "hit man." The other was Haroon Aswat, a soft-spoken, slim Indian who seemed to spend most of his time reading the Koran. Both have been with Abu Hamza at Finsbury Park, according to one former mosque worshiper in London.

The secret visit did not unfold as planned. The duo's low profile was compromised when Osman was stopped by police for a driving infraction near Klamath Falls. The two alleged Al Qaeda passengers were required to present their names and passport numbers.

At about the same time, Ujaama also drew attention from law enforcement. On his 34th birthday--Dec. 14, 1999--Ujaama and his wife were detained at a Wal-Mart store in suburban Renton for allegedly stealing a \$170 videocassette recorder. Ujaama since has called the case a misunderstanding and an example of "racial profiling." However, he failed to show up for a court hearing and a warrant was issued for his arrest.

It is clear from all accounts that the training camp notion never went very far. Abu Hamza's men, apparent veterans of holy wars, were said to be aghast. They returned to Seattle, where they lived in the mosque for a while, shared the teachings of Abu Hamza and provided some "urban tactical training" before departing, the indictment says.

Today, Abu Hamza derides the notion that he would be involved in anything so preposterous. "It's a very retarded camp in America ... for amateurs," he said. "What are you going to train there for?... Shooting trees like John Wayne? What can you do in America? You're going to have tanks there? If you have 5,000 pounds [about \$7,775] I'll make you a camp in Afghanistan. But 25,000 pounds, it wouldn't make you even anything in America.... It's yesterday's mashed potatoes."

The strange case of the Oregon jihad training camp initially didn't make it into any U.S. counter-terrorism report. Ujaama returned to London in late 1999 or early 2000, authorities say, and went back to work for Abu Hamza. Then came Sept. 11, 2001.

The attacks forced the FBI to review leads across the country--major and insignificant. Lists of foreign terrorist suspects and their associates were drawn up and matched against law enforcement databases. Alarms went off when investigators discovered, apparently through immigration entry documents and the long-obscure police traffic stop report in Oregon, that Abu Hamza's associates had been recent visitors.

Intense FBI scrutiny turned to the now shuttered Seattle mosque and anyone associated with the escapade in Bly.

Within days of the attacks, an FBI agent was at the door of Abdul-Raheem, the Seattle cabby. As it happened, Abdul-Raheem had visited London the year before, staying 10 days with Ujaama at his East London flat and having lunch with Ujaama and Abu Hamza, whom he greatly admires.

"The FBI asked me, were they radicals, did they preach hatred," recalled Abdul-Raheem, who said he never heard of a training camp plan in Bly until he read about it in the paper. "I said, 'No way. These are men of peace.' "

When Abdul-Raheem tried to take his wife and three young children to London two months later, he says the FBI detained him at the airport. Agents confronted him with an intercepted fax sent to him by Ujaama from Pakistan offering Abdul-Raheem a job teaching computer skills to youth in Pakistan.

"I don't know anything about computers, but I just wanted to live in a Muslim country and be away from all the obscenity--the fornication, the homosexuality, the prostitution," said Abdul-Raheem, who says he now is unemployed and has received dozens of death threats. "He [Ujaama] wanted to help me. That's the kind of person he is."

Meanwhile, the Seattle investigation gained impetus from interrogations of surrendering prisoners in Afghanistan.

Among the U.S. detainees taken to Camp X-Ray at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was Feroz Abbasi, a young Englishman of Ugandan origins captured while allegedly defending the former Taliban stronghold of Kunduz. Abbasi, known in the British press as the "Croydon Taliban," after his home in South London, was a former computer student who was "brainwashed" by Abu Hamza, according to his mother, a London nurse.

Under questioning, Abbasi said Ujaama introduced him to people at Al Qaeda facilities in Afghanistan, "thus enabling Abbasi's matriculation into a terrorism training camp," according to an FBI internal report.

The first arrest in the case came in May, when Osman, 32--who "helped coordinate" the Bly camp, according to the FBI document--was taken into custody as he turned up for his citizenship interview in Seattle with U.S. immigration authorities.

A search of his Tacoma apartment turned up various weapons, military maps and field manuals, "instructions on poisoning water sources," papers by Abu Hamza, "and various other items associated with Islamic radicalism," according to a law enforcement summary. Osman, a Navy reservist, pleaded guilty to a weapon charge and is said to be cooperating, hoping to avoid deportation.

Ujaama returned to the United States in June, via Toronto. He told friends and relatives he was back to start a campaign against government abuse since the Sept. 11 attacks, and planned to bring his family to live with him in Denver. "All I need is a platform," Ujaama told one relative upon his return.

Federal agents followed his every move. Surveillance teams tracked Ujaama and his brother across the Western U.S., fearing the men were scouting targets for a terrorist strike. What they monitored, instead, was a series of fishing holes where the brothers stopped between Denver and Seattle. Both are avid outdoorsmen.

"We caught a big old catfish this size," Mustafa said, spreading his arms wide apart. FBI agents arrested Ujaama in late July at his grandmother's former home in Denver.

Ujaama, who has pleaded not guilty and is being held in Seattle, is accused of participating in a conspiracy to support terrorism, an allegation that could result in a 15-year prison sentence. Ujaama called the investigation a "fascist witch hunt" in an e-mail sent to a Seattle newspaper. He is also charged with illegal use of firearms--possibly a stand-by lesser charge, one official noted, to replace the terrorism count if the former Seattle motivational speaker decides to "come clean" and provide testimony against Abu Hamza.

The prosecutor's scenario envisions Ujaama informing on his former London patron, a man who has helped Ujaama in more ways than one.

In early 1999, Ujaama's temper led to an altercation at a Seattle-area Kinko's store. Police were called and Ujaama was arrested. He eventually pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct charges, and was ordered to seek anger control treatment.

Among the documents in the suburban Tukwila court where the minor case played out is a related correspondence filed Oct. 26, 1999--at about the same time Ujaama was allegedly promoting the jihad training camp idea. It reads:

"This letter is to confirm that Mr. Earnest James Ujaama has successfully completed 16 hours of anger management classes and counseling.... Mr. Ujaama was extremely patient, and showed kindness and courtesy to our staff and clients [at] all times. He was particularly energetic, outgoing, and willing to help. In short, Mr. Ujaama was outstanding to have work with us and will be missed sorely by all of us."

The letter satisfied the court's requirement. It was signed by Abu Hamza, Finsbury Park Mosque, London.
